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Extracts from the Art of Acting-1807

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EXTRACTS FROM A POEM

ENTITLED

The Art

OF

ACTING.

WRITTEN IN IMITATION

OF

HORACE's ART OF POETRY.

Ex noto fictum carmen.——HORACE.

DUBLIN.

PRINTED BY W. HUBAND.

1807.

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THE EDITOR,

TO

THE READER.

I HAVE in vain endeavoured to discover the name, or to collect the memoirs of the author of the following criticism. With this view, I applied, not only to some of the best informed, and most eminent *Actors*, but also to several other persons, from the nature of whose studies and pursuits, I was led to expect the information I desired. Finding that even those persons who were most conversant with the business of the stage, were totally unacquainted both with the poem and its author; and conceiving the piece to be by no means deficient in merit, I have republished such parts of it, as fell within the scope of my original design; and will have ultimately comprised in this volume, the most approved practical rules for ACTING, that I have been able to collect with some industry from the works of the most celebrated ancient and modern authors.

The following extracts include all the didactic passages of the original essay; and while they contain several useful admonitions for the Actor, I apprehend they will afford some agreeable studies for the Critic.

Perhaps, it may, to a certain degree, gratify the inquisitive reader, to be informed, that this poem appears to have attracted some notice, in the life time of several of our most admired Actors. It was published in London, about seventy years ago, and was soon after reprinted in Dublin. As I find no mention made of MR: GARRICK, through the whole of the criticism, I conclude it was *written* some few years before that great luminary of the British stage, had shown in his meridian splendour. Mr: Garrick's first appearance on the London stage, was in the year 1741.

I have ventured to make some minor alterations through the following poem. To particularize them, I conceive would be unnecessary.

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THE ART

OF

ACTING.

A POEM.

SHOULD *Hogarth*, with extravagant conceit,
Make a strange group of contrast figures meet,
Beneath a plume that nods with tragic grace,
Sketch the quaint drollery of *Hippsley's* face;
Then to that face add *Chloe's* neck and breast,
Beauteous as thought e'er formed, or tongue expreſt;
Amass the properties of motley scenes,
Of Gods, of Kings, of Devils and of Queens,
Strike out a form that Nature need not brag on,
With crest of *Cæsar*, and with tail of dragon,
Part male; part female; devil part; part God;
Who could restrain a smile at sight so odd?

But odd as such a Being must appear,
'Tis but the just resemblance of a Play'r,
Who rashly dare depart from Nature's rule,
And rather wonder raise, than touch the soul;

Whose

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Whose storms and incoherent actions seem,
Like the wild ravings of a sick man's dream;
Which while the fev'rish phrenzy may prevail,
Flow unconnected, without head or tail.

Actors and *poets* have an equal right,
By bold attempts our pleasure to excite;
Leave dull theatric *precedents* of art,
And with peculiar manner catch the heart.
Bold are these liberties which actors claim,
And great their freedom in pursuit of fame,
Yet still no licence can confer pretence,
To break the steady rules of *common-sense*.

Some, when grave scenes should rise with solemn state,
And all the hero be sublimely great,
Absurdly vain, exert an idle care,
To please the eye, or gently sooth the ear:
In senate, or in camp, in joy, or woe,
The plume must wave, the voice must sweetly flow;
High character by length of train be shown,
And dignity by drawling out the tone.
Justly the plume may grace the actor's mien,
And the Imperial robe adorn the scene;
Justly the numbers flowing from the tongue,
May warble sweet as Philomela's song,

While

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While vales, and dales, and murm'ring streams which rove
Gently meand'ring through the leafy grove,
The subjects are—but if ill judg'd the choice,
Of splendid dress, and modulated voice,
The vest though rich, the voice though soft and clear,
Will all a dull extravagance appear:
Both sometimes please; but this is not their place,
Consult propriety alone for grace.

There's *Hayman's* § scenes our senses can controul,
And with creative fancy charm the soul;
His happy pencil flows with just command,
And Nature starts obedient to his hand:
We hear the tink'ling rill, we see the trees
Cast dusky shades, and catch the gentle breeze:
Here shoots through leafy bow'rs a sunny ray,
That gilds the grove, and emulates the day:
There mountain tops look glad; there vallies sing,
And through the landscape blooms eternal spring;
But what's this art, should he such art perform,
And join it to the horrors of a storm;
Where quick-fork'd lightnings gleam, loud thunders roar,
And foaming billows lash the sounding shoar;
Where reared on mountains, with impetuous shock,
The drifted Vessel bulges on the rock;

The

§ *A celebrated Scene-Painter.*

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The hopeless Sailor raising high his hand,
And corse on corse come rolling on the strand.
In storm and landscape each, we beauties find,
But stare to meet them thus, together joined.

Art ruled by Nature must direct the soul,
And ev'ry gesture, look, and word controul.
Deceiv'd by specious rules most actors run
Into the contrast errors they would shun:
Some, who would gaiety or passion show,
With smart, lisp'd-catch, make half-form'd numbers flow;
Swift rolls the jargon sound, a rapid flood,
With not one word distinctly understood:
Thus, striving to avoid a drawling tone,
An equal impropriety is shown.
Others, to seem articulate and clear,
With dull, loud, slow, plain sound fatigue the ear;
All words, all lines, the same grave cadence keep,
And drowsy lull insensibly to sleep:
While some, to prove that they no spirits want,
Out-roar *Drawcansir* in the tragic rant.
A few, who fear what critics may explode,
With heavy pace jog on the beaten road;
Content in acting just with common-sense,
Afraid to deviate into excellence;
They never charm, nor never much offend,
And with the merit they began will end.

Often

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Often, a fruitful Genius of the stage,
Will try all arts and methods to engage;
Buffoonly dress, affect a monstrous tone,
Reject the poet's wit, adopt his own;
As Sailor, or as Clown, as Beau, or Play'r,
No matter what, or how, or when, or where,
Will scenes, and times, and characters confound,
To hear of false applause the vulgar sound.

All you who feel a noble thirst for fame;
And from the stage a just applause would claim,
From the first moment you commence a play'r,
And strut at Smithfield or at Southwark fair,
Long as you may a better fortune wait,
And strolling, know variety of fate;
Just as the Gods direct the lot of things,
Are this day Coblers, and to-morrow Kings;
Your genius tried, consult your head and heart,
Dare not to flights — be equal to your part.
Damn'd you might be attempting *Wildair's* ease,
In *The Mock-Doctor* when you hope to please;
On parts adapted to your talents dwell,
And be your only study to excel.
Hence they who judgment to their choice admit,
When cast to characters their talents hit,
Such ease with such expressive force is shown,
They make the poet's sentiments their own;

Into

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Into each Part so perfectly they fall,
It seems no longer art, but nature all.

Such must the method be, or much I err,
To gain high credit in a Theatre.
What Parts may now, or what may then be play'd,
What to some future time should be delay'd,
Whose manners, or whose action you should like,
How *far* at *imitation* you may strike,
What to adopt, what shun, must well be known,
To rise a fav'rite Actor with the town.

Be cautious, though it long has practic'd been,
To add your own wit to the poet's scene;
To your immediate Part be strictly true,
Nor to the old insert one sentence new:
For each new passage here must licens'd be,
Nor are the actors more than poets free;
Yet it may shew a readiness of mind,
And from your audience sure applause will find,
If as by accident, and not by art,
You add some trait that's new, and timely smart;
Or some keen satire on some ancient crimes,
You mark, as level'd at our modern times.

There are peculiar manners of the stage,
And various modes which vary with the age;
Why are they envi'd then, who dare pursue
Where genius leads to strike out something new?

In

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In the last age gay Mountford charm'd the town,
With comic art peculiarly her own;
Shall not our Clive as great an honour claim,
Who fixt on inborn excellence her fame?
Our sires to Mountford great encomiums raise,
Shall *we* not Clive with equal ardour praise?
We great originals must both allow,
And all that Mountford once was, Clive is now.

It ever pleas'd the town, and ever will,
To see old parts receive new humour still:
They who preceding actors would pursue,
And strive to bring a sameness to our view,
By the dull copy all our loss renew:
But when we see young Players justly bold,
Rise to perfection, we forget the old.

While nations perish, and while states decay,
The modes of Acting change as well as they.
Hence if the art would represent mankind,
Actors new methods ev'ry age must find;
As fashions vary, or as humours change,
Attempt this year, what might the last seem strange:
For so the player in esteem is plac'd,
Who hits with most success the reigning taste;
Be what it will, to hit *that* wins the heart,
Supposes judgment, and *it* shows an art.

But

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But through the various drama of the stage,
In any part whoever would engage,
To gain applause from judges, must excel:
'Tis *wretched* to be *tolerably well.*

Some parts 'tis danger to attempt at all,
When late we've seen some great original;
By first impressions so completely caught,
The copy though well copied, still has fault.

Why as just actors should we those admit,
Who place themselves in characters unfit?
In other parts be pleasing as they will,
When hence they fail, they shew their want of skill:
And sure the greatest player should be told
Of glaring faults, and be by sense controul'd:
Better it were by friendly hints be taught,
Than lose at once, the fame so slowly got.

A happy genius for low-humour'd farce,
Ill would attempt the sound of tragic verse;
A motley tone would break through all the style
And awkard action make the critic smile:
Or when a Pigmy hero we behold,
In burlesque pomp, self-confident and bold,
Roll round his goggle eyes with vacant grin,
And thump his heart — to show it touch'd within,
His tragic-comic countenance, and stride,
By fools applauded, men of sense deride.

Some,

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Some, not content their excellence to show,
Strive to reveal their imperfections too.
Confin'd to proper walks would actors be,
All would appear with more propriety.
Yet I allow, that in the comic scene,
Some who excel, excel in tragic strain,
And some, who justly reach the tragic style,
In comic scenes as justly make us smile.

'Tis not sufficient to repeat a part
With proper accent; it must reach the heart.
The actor to the audience must reveal,
He has the will and faculty to feel:
Mov'd in himself, all others he controuls,
Commands their thoughts, and agitates their souls.

When *Cato* gives his little senate laws,
What bosom pants not in his gen'rous cause?
But should we while the Roman we revere,
See the great patriot sink into the play'r:
See him look round box, gallery, and pit,
Nor the least seeming thought of Rome admit;
Who would not laugh to think that this survey
Was but to mark some friend, as if to say,
Damn all this stuff—let Rome be lost or won,
We'll drink our bottle when the play is done.

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When Acting strive to seem what you are not,
Which to accomplish, *self* must be forgot;
Close to the business of the scene attend,
And proper action with your silence blend;
Whether in front, aside, or back retir'd,
Something to *do*, or *seem*, is still requir'd.
'Tis not enough you just can catch the *cue*,
A strict attention's to the audience due;
Gaze not around on them; they do not pay
To see you turn spectator, but to play.

Some, to the stage unuse'd, unskill'd, untaught,
To charm at first appearance have been brought,
And of applause secure, assume a part
Requires experience, and the nicest art:
The specious Bill announces o'er and o'er,
They ne'er appear'd on any stage *before*,
And when they *once* appear — appear *no more*.

So have I seen large-letter'd Bills proclaim,
(In *red* lines FRANCE was mark'd, in *black* the name;)
A celebrated *Frenchman* was to dance,
His first appearance since he came from France.
The House was crowded, the third act was done;
The Fiddlers flourish'd as they brought him on:
He came — he caper'd once — and off he run.
The solemn pomp all ended in a joke,
For smack — the string that tied his breeches broke.

Vain

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Vain are the *puffs* to public papers sent;
Vain are the arts which *Cibber* could invent;
What aid can *bills*, or *self*-applauses lend?
On *merit* only must success depend.
BOOTH ne'er attempted in a hopeless way,
To reach perfection in his first essay;
Through many Counties had he strolling been,
Trod many a stage, and practic'd many a scene,
Before the British ROSCIUS he became,
And gain'd on Britain's stage a lasting fame.

THE END.

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